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SUBJECT: GUATEMALAN ELECTION UPDATE: ONE WEEK TO BALLOTING

REF: A. GUATEMALA 2769

[1](#)B. GUATEMALA 2705

Classified By: PolCouns David Lindwall for reason 1.5 (b) and (d)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: Polls show voter preferences largely unchanged, with Berger ahead with 41%, followed by Colom (22.3%) and Rios Montt (13.3%). Informal polling conducted by Embassy in the countryside supports these results. The OAS and EU Observer Missions say the TSE has addressed problems with the voter registration list ("padron") effectively by setting up special tables for "observed votes" at all polling places. There is a growing concern of ours, shared by the EU Ambassadors, that continuing (and politically motivated) press reports publicizing rumors of potential fraud and violence will undermine the credibility of a relatively good electoral process. The Ambassador met separately with candidates Lopez Rodas, Rios Montt (reftel) and Colom to discuss election issues. With only a week left before the elections, political tensions remain much lower than their high point in July, but are, as expected, spiking again in the runup to election day. End summary.

What the Polls Say

[1](#)2. (U) A Noguera poll taken October 24-29 showed GANA candidate Oscar Berger significantly ahead with 41.0% of voter preferences, up only marginally from September. UNE's Alvaro Colom rose significantly from 15.9% in September to 22.3% in the final week of October. FRG candidate Rios Montt also rose slightly from 12.2% to 13.3%. Voters continued to list violent crime as their most serious concern (46%), followed by unemployment (40%), the economic situation (25%) and corruption (13%). Eighty-four percent said they intended to vote (which would be a record in Guatemala), and 57.9% said they would never vote for Rios Montt (only 7.9% said they would never vote for Berger). The poll also suggested that votes for Congress would be much more divided than the presidential vote, and that no party is likely to have a working majority in Congress. Following are the voter preference percentages:

	voting preferences as a percentage of respondents			
	July	August	September	Oct. 24-29
Berger - GANA	30.5	39.6	40.7	41.0
Colom - UNE	12.6	16.7	15.9	22.3
Rios Montt - FRG	10.3	11.5	12.2	13.3
Lopez Rodas - PAN	3.4	4.2	4.9	6.2

OAS and EU Observers Say TSE On-Track

[1](#)3. (SBU) The electoral observation missions of the EU and OAS hosted a meeting for Ambassadors on October 29 in which, among other things, they noted that the Supreme Electoral Tribunal (TSE) will set up a special table at each voting place to receive votes from properly credentialed voters whose registration is not recorded or is recorded at a distant voting place. This measure is to ensure that technical difficulties with the voter registration list ("padron electoral") do not lead to the disenfranchisement of voters. Regional offices of the TSE have told us that they have reviewed the voter registration lists for their departments, and that they do not expect any more problems than previous years with voters being able to find their voting places.

[1](#)4. (SBU) At the same meeting, the EU Ambassadors, normally outspoken in their fears of election day manipulation by the FRG, expressed concern instead that the media (largely anti-FRG) was generating an unfounded sense that there would be significant violence on election day (an argument we have attempted to counter through numerous public messages urging voters to go to the polls), and that this message could undermine voter participation and the credibility of the electoral process. All agreed that the TSE was doing a good job, and that it was above partisan manipulation. And while violence after the election typically does occur at the local level here, press headlines warning of the possibility of election-day violence could scare Guatemalans into staying home. An AID contractor with significant experience in other Latin American elections recently noted in his evaluation of the process in Guatemala that civil society, the opposition

and the media are so determined to keep one of the candidates (Rios Montt) from winning, that they have lost their objectivity to the detriment of the electoral process itself. Their frequent sounding alarm over the potential for violence on election day will establish their claim to challenge the electoral outcome in the event the candidate they oppose makes it into the second round.

#### Ambassador Meets with Candidates

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15. (C) The Ambassador met at the Residence with PAN presidential candidate Leonel Lopez Rodas on October 28, FRG candidate Rios Montt on October 29 (reftel) and UNE candidate Alvaro Colom on October 31. He had previously met with GANA candidates Berger and Stein (ref B). Lopez Rodas, who was accompanied by Congressional candidate Luis Rubio, said that the PAN did not expect fraud on election day, but said he does not have confidence that FRG members in remote areas will respect the outcome of the election. He welcomed the chance to dialogue with us on bilateral issues, should he make it into the second round. Lopez Rodas (who has not broken into double digits in all but his own polls), looked tired and did not come across as expecting to make it into the second round. In response to a query from the Ambassador, Lopez Rodas said that he would ensure that PAN members do not challenge the election results, should they lose, by anything but legal means.

16. (C) UNE candidate Alvaro Colom, who was accompanied by economic policy advisor Fernando Monroy, was upbeat, recognizing that all the independent polls put him in a relatively solid second place. Monroy told us that "second place" status had brought with it significant contributions from new campaign supporters, and that the party would have the resources for its final push. Like the other candidates, Colom expressed confidence about the elections being free and fair, but qualified it by saying he could not guess how the FRG would react to a first round defeat. He said that, should UNE lose in the first round (which he virtually discounted), he would challenge the results only by legal means, and then only if it was clear that his loss was the result of fraud. Pressed by the Ambassador, he pledged to get the message to his supporters that "taking the streets" on election night, in the event of a defeat, was unacceptable. Colom said that organized crime figures were seeking meetings with him, presumably to offer financial support, and that he had avoided any contact with them and instructed his advisors to do the same. Like the other candidates, Colom said he would welcome a meeting between his transition team and the Embassy to discuss in more depth the bilateral agenda in the event he makes it into the second round.

#### Comment

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17. (SBU) Despite isolated acts of violence, potentially related to the elections, political tensions overall are much reduced from July, although, as one would expect, they are spiking again in the runup to election day itself. There are some technical problems with the "padron electoral," but the international observation missions are satisfied that they will not result in vote fraud, and the TSE has made provision to ensure voters are not disenfranchised. The major candidates have all told us they do not expect fraud to have an impact on election day, and have pledged to get the word out to their supporters that post-election violence is unacceptable. With a week left before balloting, voter preferences have not shifted significantly. In Guatemala, surprises are always possible, but so far things look poised for an orderly election on November 9.  
HAMILTON